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SUBJECT: Zabul residents say "Show us the COIN!"

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The expansion of Forward Operating Base Wolverine in Zabul is at the heart of counterinsurgency (COIN) activities. To mitigate the negative effects of building a massive International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) military installation within the center of an insurgent area in an already unstable province, coalition forces are using a variety of tools to win the support of local communities, promote the Afghan government, and blunt the impact for a handful of landowners who lost their fields. Zabul presents a tough environment: low levels of literacy and high levels of poverty (even by Afghan standards), and a stream of insurgents flowing through its border from Pakistan. ISAF management of the construction and operations of an enormous base, with Strykers and helicopters and eventually a C-17 airstrip, will directly impact COIN efforts in the province. End Summary.

A tough sell in a tough environment

¶2. (SBU) FOB Wolverine lies in the middle of Suri, a sub-district in the middle of Zabul, 17 km from Highway One, and two hours down a dirt road in a highly kinetic area. It hosts a variety of tribes, but the dominant are the Khotaks. Many local villages passively or actively support the Taliban, or are coerced into helping them. In the last three months, Wolverine has received more enemy fire than any other FOB in the province. U.S. troops mentoring the local Afghan Army Battalion (Kandak) as an Embedded Training Team (ETT) note that some areas are effectively "no-go zones" for the Afghan National Army (ANA). The Afghan government has historically made minimal efforts to extend government control and security in the area beyond a major supply route running through the center of the area. A Suri man, Bismillah Khan, received international attention in September 2008 when the Taliban cut off his ears because he worked for the Afghan government as a teacher at the sole local school, which is now closed.

¶3. (SBU) The decision to expand FOB Wolverine, which currently houses a small U.S. ETT team and the 4th Kandak, to a facility to house elements of a Stryker Brigade Combat Team (SBCT), supporting aviation assets, and a C-17 capable airfield, initially terrified the local population, who feared an increase in conflicts between security forces and resident Taliban. In January and February, many Suri elders repeatedly made the journey to the provincial capital Qalat in an attempt to dissuade U.S. Forces from the proposed expansion. In addition to attracting insurgents, elders argued that the base expansion would result in the loss of their lands and destroy their underground irrigation systems, and that noise from the airfield would disrupt their daily life and frighten their families. They petitioned then-

Governor Arman to stop the base expansion, not realizing that the Ministry of Defense (MOD) had approved the plans in December 2008 and was unlikely to change its decision.

Winning them over, one cup of tea at a time

¶4. (SBU) Over a series of individual meetings and Afghan-style style town hall "shuras" held in Suri and in Qalat, coalition forces ranging from the ETT to the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) to engineers and contracting officers from the construction Task Force Remagen in Kandahar worked with the ANA and the Afghan government (GIROA) to assuage local fears and emphasize the security and development benefits the expanded base would bring. Coalition forces also rallied the support of the provincial authorities to work on land titling issues. RC-South Deputy Commander for Stabilization (DCOM STAB) Brigadier General Nicholson personally briefed former Governor Arman in January to ensure that the provincial government would help address community concerns.

¶5. (SBU) In addition to the very real threat of more Taliban coming to their communities and demanding shelter while they plan or execute their attacks, elders expressed two main concerns about the base: 1) on an individual level it confiscated the fields from a handful of families who may not be compensated by the MOD; and 2) on a community level the construction would disrupt the "karez" irrigation system and potentially ruin watersheds and water tables and add airplane noise to the area.

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They also asked that contractors and laborers from Suri be given preference over outsiders from "Kandahar or Ghazni."

¶6. (SBU) In response to residents' concerns, coalition forces have used a number of initiatives to build trust, push quick-impact development projects and promote the Afghan government and ANA presence in Suri. The result has been to change firm opposition to resignation towards the inevitable and recognition of the tangible employment and development benefits available. These initiatives include:

-- Local Stability Initiatives (LSI): The Wolverine-based ETT has used the small grants mechanism of USAID/LGCD Local Stability Initiatives (LSI) to conduct seven quick impact projects in key villages around Suri. Working closely with their ANA counterparts, LSI allows the coalition forces at the site to respond immediately to community needs and concerns, and deliver some basic services, like cleaning clogged irrigation channels. An ANA officer in Suri noted the success at winning public opinion: "Many years ago the United States gave money to the Mujahaddin. Then you gave it to contractors, not even the Afghan government. Now, finally, you are giving it to the people."

-- Land Titling Economic Restructuring Activities (LTERA): The USAID/LTERA field visit March 26-30 visit culminated in a March 29 provincial government-led meeting with Suri elders, provincial officials, LTERA, as well as Zabul PRT engineering and civil affairs staff and Task Force Remagen to conduct public outreach about the expansion, as well as collect documentation from communities and individuals. LTERA recommended designing a pilot-project model methodology for quantifying the impacts. This analysis could be provided to the appropriate GIROA officials as deliverables to use in the decision process for land compensation packages. LTERA also recommended engaging the Ministries of Defense and Agriculture on behalf of the provincial government and the people. PRT will help develop some next steps

for helping the handful of individual landowners seeking compensation for their lost production and lands.

-- PRT Commanders' Emergency Response Programs (CERP): The PRT distributed humanitarian assistance and winter/spring wheat seeds and will continue to monitor for opportunities for quick-impact assistance. CERP funding will construct at least three wells, and provide a veterinarian's visit for herders, as well as introduce water sanitation and malnutrition rehabilitation programs in partnership with the local medical clinic. Coalition forces will continue to propose new projects that benefit the communities--schools, mosques, clinic, and wells--in conjunction with local authorities.

-- TF Remagen has made several visits to Suri to explain the construction process and better understand the residents' engineering concerns. The lead airfield engineer even accompanied several ANA community engagement missions to meet with local tribal leaders, gaining a first-hand awareness of local concerns and demonstrating a sincere U.S. and GIROA commitment to addressing them. The contracting officer, in collaboration with the PRT, met several times with local businessmen about the process to bid on various contracts connected with the new base. Additionally, larger contractors have been advised to hire local workers and the communities have confirmed that more and more jobs on the construction site have been made available to them.

-- USACE Hydrology study: A comprehensive look at the water issues at the base site identified areas where base expansion, to include a concrete plant and construction wells, undermines the counterinsurgency efforts and supports Taliban claims that the base will destroy the water supply to fields. The study will help the U.S. engineers to make adjustments, and allow the PRT and others to tailor their development projects to compensating for any damage or disruption.

-- The resident ANA Kandak seized the base expansion as a window of opportunity to execute Operation Suri Embrace, a COIN-based strategy to win the support of local leaders by extending GIROA presence into key villages to address village needs, including those created by the expansion itself.

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¶7. (SBU) Comment: While no single act will determine the success or failure of the new base, taken together, the coordinated development projects and public outreach represent a wide-ranging interagency approach to COIN in the region. A few unresolved issues could still tip the balance of public opinion--including how individual compensation is handled by the Afghan government and coalition forces, how the procurement process is perceived by those who feel entitled to a contract, and the base expansion's perceived impact on water resources. Despite starting as an unhappy population who threatened to take to the hills and "fight like we fought the Soviets," the Suri residents are starting to feel the benefits of a more engaged Afghan government and a coalition serious about local development.

¶8. (U) PRT, ETT, USAID and TF-Remagen all coordinated in preparing this cable.

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